THE RAGTIME SOCIETY

DEDICATED TO THE PRESERVATION OF CLASSIC RAGTIME

P.O. BOX 8 KING, ONT., CANADA

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As we stated in our last Bulletin, we are reproducing the script from Max Morath's new Education TV Series "The Turn of the Century". This script is for programme No. 5 entitled "Classic Ragtime". The series will be aired in the fall and we are sure that after reading this fine short story on Classic Ragtime that you will do everything possible to see programme No. 5. We will give you times and stations when we know them.

The script indicates what Max plays and what he talks about. In spots there is commentary by various announcers who take the parts of the people quoted.

"TURN OF THE CENTURY"

PIANO THEME: "Weeping Willow" (about one minute).

MORATH:

That piece is called "Weeping Willow"; it was written at the turn of the century by an American composer named Scott Joplin. It is Ragtime - Classic Ragtime.

By 1915 Ragtime compositions of high quality were known as "Classics". In the proper dictionary definition of the word: "That which sets the standard; a work of the highest class and acknowledged excellence" in its field. From the handful of men who produced Ragtime of the first rank, three names stand out: Scott Joplin, Joseph Lamb, and James Scott. This programme is devoted and dedicated to these men and their music. The music called Ragtime - a music strictly made in America during the years across the turn of the century.

No musical analysis of Ragtime coming up - no dissections or inspections. No point even in going into much biographical detail about Joplin and Lamb and Scott. We just want you to know their names and see their faces and hear their music. Also from time to time, judgements and predictions by critics and commentators of the period will be pronounced.

ANNOUNCER:

Ragtime's days are numbered. We are sorry that anyone should imagine that Ragtime was of the least importance. It was a popular wave in the wrong direction!

So said an article in METRONOME magazine, 1901. Apparently Scott Joplin didn't read it; he was too busy with his music. Joplin was easily the most serious of the Ragtime composers. A schooled musician, he wrote in 1899 the best known of all the Rags, the celebrated "Maple Leaf". A big seller for years, the "Maple Leaf Rag" is still performed a lot today. Joplin went on to develop a different and more melodic style however, exemplified in a 1907 composition - the graceful "Gladiolus Rag".

PIANO SOLO: "Gladiolus Rag".

ANNOUNCER:

Ragtime has carried the complexities of rhythmic subdivision of the measure to a point never before reached in the history of music. It has established subtle, conflicting rhythms never before attempted in popular or folk music and rarely enough in art music. It has gone far beyond most popular music in the freedom of inner voices - yes, I mean polyphony - and of harmonic modulation.

MORATH:

Critic H. K. Moderwell, a friend of Ragtime, speaking out in 1915.

Joseph Lamb was busy with Ragtime by then, although most critics and writers hadn't heard of him, and never did. Joplin's "Gladiolus" was Lamb's favourite. He was about twenty years younger than Joplin, and a great admirer of the older man.

Lamb was not a professional musician - I mean he did not play the piano for shows or in theatres or cabarets. He had less musical training than Joplin. He did have a natural gift of melody and a love for syncopation. Here is Joseph Lamb's "Ragtime Nightingale".

PIANO SOLO: "Ragtime Nightingale".

Most of the rags of Joplin, Lamb and James Scott were published by the firm of John Stark & Sons, St. Louis. Stark deserves a salute. He loved classic Ragtime so much he published a lot of rags he knew wouldn't sell.

I guess I should clear that one up. These Rags you're hearing weren't widely popular at the turn of the century. Even the better Rags had come into the world in the 90's via the saloons and sporting houses, so naturally Ragtime just couldn't get respectable. The few men that thought it could, and would - went their quiet way, writing their music, believing in it. Publisher John Stark summed it up in 1916, in the magazine "Ragtime Review".

ANNOUNCER:

"In the first place the name (Ragtime) was no doubt a handicap. Then, there were quite a number of fairly good players who could not play it, and of course these were against it .....and last, there were quite a number of good souls who really believed there (was) something evil lurking somehow in Ragtime".

MORATH:

PIANO SOLO: "Ragtime Oriole".

That was "Ragtime Oriole" by James Scott; he wrote it in 1911. So now you've met the "Big Three": James Scott, Joseph Lamb, and Scott Joplin. There were others, but as the years have passed these three have emerged as the best, the most productive. We had two reasons for including a programme about Classic Ragtime in this series about life in America at the turn of the century. For one thing, Ragtime was so much a part of those years that listening to real Ragtime is like thumbing thru old copies of the "Ladies Home Journal" or viewing stereoscope pictures. Ragtime was as much a part of that America as William Jennings Bryan or The Gibson Girl, The trolley car or the whalebone corset. These are gone; so is Ragtime.

And I for one wouldn't want to revive it - by that I mean, try to make it falsely a pseudo-contemporary music again. (On the other hand, I think everybody should play Rag, and more on that later). To revisit Ragtime on its own terms is the way to enjoy it - to savour it, and thus savour the years in America that produced it. Ragtime didn't stand still, you know. It had vigor; like any good musical idea it evolved, developed. It moved forward in spite of dilution and commercialization. Viewed from the 1960's Ragtime is clearly a sturdy ancestor of modern jazz, the most exciting music of the century. This, of course, is hindsight on my part, so I'm on safe ground. Here's some remarkable foresight from 1920 by the distinguished playwright Rupert Hughes, who also found time to compile the music "Lover Encyclopedia":

ANNOUNCER:

"It has been my contention for years that in Ragtime the American will find his most distinctive rhythms, his most characteristic music. Behind it there is the germ of something very wonderful which the composer with ears made in American will build into the master music of tomorrow".

MORATH:

So the second reason for this programme in the series is simply to pay tribute to three men, men who had already started to make that prediction come true - not commonly thought of as Jazz Pioneers - but who deserve recognition too late, as is often the case.

Joe Lamb lived in modest seclusion in Brooklyn until his death in 1960. His biographer, Russ Cassidy of St. Louis, said this: "(Joseph Lamb) composed simply for the satisfaction of his creative urge; his Rags were an end unto themselves". He called this one "Top Liner".

PIANO SOLO: "Top Liner".

In 1904 the World's Fair at St. Louis had America wide-eyed. It was the 100th. anniversary of the Louisiana purchase - just a scant century since the vast American heartland had been a wilderness - and now look - a thriving, industrious, continent-wide nation. And here

was this lavish exhibition in the parent city of Ragtime, St. Louis, Missouri - home of the stark publishing company, and home base to a thousand brilliant, nameless Ragtime piano players - the itinerant minstrels of America at the turn of the century.

Scott Joplin, reacting like any creative musician in any age and any country, commemorated the Fair in the only way he knew - in music. He named his composition for the lavish fountains at the Fair. This is the "Cascades" by Scott Joplin.

PIANO SOLO: "The Cascades"

ANNOUNCER:

"Ragtime is the perfect expression of the American city with its restless bustle and motion. Its technical resourcefulness continually surprises me, its melodies at their best delight me. I am sure that many a native composer could save his soul if he would open his ears to this folk music of the American city".

MORATH:

Moderwell again, 1917. Pure Ragtime is folk music, you know. The fact that a few men had enough sense to write it down at the time doesn't alter the fact. Ragtime was a folk music of the city. That bothered some of the critics. They demanded that since folk music had always come from the rural types, America's ought to do that. Of course we had that kind of folk music too. Trouble was, except for the negro spirituals and work songs, it sounded European - English, or Spanish or Irish or Welsh. Ragtime didn't; it was ours. In 1917, the year Scott Joplin died a pauper, his mind gone, a pretty smart fellow named Carl Van Vechten said this:

ANNOUNCER:

"Americans are inclined to look everywhere but under their noses for art".

MORATH:

Another James Scott Rag for you. Scott spent much of his life in Kansas City, taught piano there. He didn't devote much time to playing the saloons or parlour houses in those days either, but he wrote a lot of Ragtime, bright, sturdy Ragtime - this is "Climax Rag".

PIANO SOLO: "Climax Rag".

You can buy a copy of "Climax" in a reprint book. Just thought I'd pass that along. Only a few of the classic Rags are available in reprint. The rest of them, well, you just have to dig. Sounds like I'm selling Ragtime doesn't it? I am. I know that many of you play the piano, or used to play the piano. You studied hard for a while - you grew up, went to work, got married, looked back one day and realized you hadn't touched a piano for years. I'm suggesting - play Ragtime. It's a wonderful way to bring the piano back into your life. It really will. That's what Ragtime was meant to do in the first place.

You read Ragtime, you know. Of course it can be, and was, improvised too, as a style. But the classic Rags are written; these Rags I've been playing are not my arrangements; they're memorized from the sheet music.

I know plenty of people who have quit playing the piano, or maybe they still play some, but have gone stale - no time to keep up on a serious classical repertory, and the improvised style of jazz, either traditional or contemporary, eludes them - so they're discouraged.

Play Rag; it's like reading a good detective story, it's absorbing.

I know a surgeon in Seattle, an engineer in St. Louis, a business man in Toronto, who are playing Ragtime. I've met college students and retired school teachers who have recently taken to playing Joplin and Scott and Lamb and the others, delighted each time they tack together a difficult Rag after hours of practice that go by like minutes.

You'll get hooked! You'll dig in attics and cellars for dog-eared, crumbling sheet music. When you find a charming old John Stark cover on a forgotten Joplin Rag, you'll feel like you've discovered the lost Dutchman Mine. It's an infection. I know people who can't play a note, collecting Ragtime music and piano rolls, too; they'd rather talk Ragtime than eat.

Once you'v hooked, you'll want to find out more and more about Ragtime, about Classic Rag and it's men, so you'll start looking in books and magazines. You'll find that this delightful, friendly music has had few literary friends. But you will discover one charming, thorough-going book called "They All Played Ragtime", by Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis. After you've read it - if you weren't hooked before, you'll be addicted to Ragtime for life.

If I've neglected some of you on this programme in favour of the potential Ragtime piano players, sorry - but you'll have your day - the record collectors, the old car fans - the philatelists and the antique fanciers; there is something for everyone at the turn of the century. But this was one for Ragtime - and it's the most fun when you play it yourself. That's what Ragtime was, is and always will be: fun, pure enjoyment; happy, husky piano music that will always take you, when you desire, back to the turn of the century. I'll say goodbye with Scott Joplin's "Elite Syncopations".

PIANO SOLO: "Elite Syncopations" (about one minute).

What you have just read is the "working" script for Max's programme No. 5. It doesn't contain much in the way of video elements and description. Ther were also some minor changes made when the script was used for the final delivery to the video tape.

In the script there are references to "announcer". In the actual programme this is Robert Benson, a very fine character actor who plays in the series "The Turn of The Century" in many capacities. In programme No. 5 he plays a composite critic - a voice from the past, suitably attired in period dress and makeup. The set is a gallery-type of room; period picture frames are used as a running visual device. The titles appear in floating picture frames, and the audience's first view of the set is through a frame. Robert Benson also speaks similarly "framed". As the Rags of Joplin, Scott and Lamb are played, portraits of the three men are presented briefly "framed".

Max tells us that good photographs of Joplin and Scott are hard to obtain. He was able to get excellent photographic portraits in pencil from a very talented man called Howard Weilmuenster. Howard (who is a member of the Society) is talented in many directions. He is an accomplished artist; he hand-cuts his own perfect player piano rolls; he plays banjo very well, playing on a rare and wonderful Fred Van Eps banjo. Howard learned to play banjo from Fred Van Eps. As we said, a very talented man.

Max will try to provide us with a complete list of stations carrying this series. We think you should all see it for sure. You will have to check yourself to ascertain the exact time and day. The programme won't be until the fall, but Max gets a vote of thanks from us now for what he has done and will continue to do for Classic Ragtime.

We would like to thank those of you who ordered "Original Rags" for being so understanding about our delays with our first printing job. It came off not too badly and we will improve with our second offering this month of "Elite Syncopations". We plan to print the latter on May 15th., so if you want "Elite Syncopations" please send us your $1.00 before then. Needless to say, we have extra copies of "Original" and will have of "Elite" also, but we need a certain number of orders to make an economical run at the printers. Talking about sheet music, you will see that our list of available items is much larger this month and includes among other things "Opera House Rag" by Bob Darch - arranged by Joseph F. Lamb. This Rag is well written and rewarding to play. It is printed in three colours, with a fine description of Piper's Opera House in Virginia City, Nevada. Bob has written many fine Rags - this is one that has been published. We hope to see more in the future.

Johnny Maddox finishes at the Guildwood Inn, near Sarnia, Ontario, and opens April 19th. for one month at the Holiday Inn, Joplin, Mo. Bob Darch closes at the Bonanza Room at the Escape Hotel late in April, then to Toronto for the Ragtime Concert on May 4, 5, and 6th., then to the Club 76 in Toronto until approximately July 1st.

Bulletin No. 4 will review this concert in Toronto. We hope a lot of our members will get to hear it in person.